

**Appreciative Narratives as Leadership Research:
Matching Method to Lens**

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Abstract: This chapter explores the potential of appreciative inquiry for doing empirical work on leadership. We use a framework that matches a constructionist theoretical *lens*, an appreciative and participative *stance*, a *focus* on the work of leadership (as opposed to leaders), and multiple *methods* of inquiry (narrative, ethnographic and cooperative). We elaborate on our experiences with narrative inquiry, while highlighting the value of doing narrative inquiry in an appreciative manner. Finally, we suggest that this particular framework is helping us see how social change leadership work reframes the value that the larger society attributes to members of vulnerable communities.

Introduction

Appreciative inquiry is best known as an intervention strategy, but it can also be thought of as a stance for inquiry, a way of joining with others to explore the world. Our contribution in this volume is to build on the research side of appreciative inquiry by exploring its potential for looking at leadership. We argue that, given the roots of appreciative inquiry in constructionism, and an emerging trend to see leadership as a social construct, appreciative inquiry emerges as one of the most appropriate methodological frameworks to pursue empirical work on leadership.

Most leadership research operates from a positivist frame on a set of implicit assumptions that does not explicitly address the logic of the relationship between theory and methods.¹ In this chapter, we reflect on our use of appreciative inquiry to develop what we believe is a sound and internally coherent approach to research on leadership. We offer a story about the emergence of a research design to study leadership that has lessons about the nature of leadership, the role of appreciative inquiry and the power of the match between methods and lens.

This story begins with the definition of our particular lens, the idea that leadership is a social construction. A constructionist lens implies that our understanding of leadership is socially constructed over time, as individuals interact with one another. This means that people carry mental models of leadership (Gardner 1995) and that groups of individuals come to mean the same thing when they use the term “leader.” (By invoking these models, it is possible for any of us to imagine or even picture a “leader.”) A

¹ A critical standard by which to judge the quality of research is called “indication,” or the extent to which the methods one chooses matches one’s theoretical framework (Bauer and Gaskell 2000). For a discussion of indication in leadership research, see Ospina (2002).

constructionist lens lets us see that leadership fulfills a social function. But more importantly, it suggests that leadership happens when people construct meaning in action. In other words, leadership can be considered to be a shared act of meaning making in the context of a group's work to accomplish a common purpose (Drath and Palus 1994).

The choice of lens has clear implications for both focus (what to study) and stance (who defines what is important and does the research). In terms of focus, we argue that a social construction lens leads us to pay attention to the collective work of leadership in context, more than to the behaviors of people called leaders. If leadership is about meaning making, then it is inevitably relational and collective, and therefore, more about the experience people have as they try to make sense of their work and less about individual traits or behaviors. In terms of stance, once a researcher has decided to focus on the experiences associated with the work of leadership, not on the leader as an individual, we argue that it becomes compelling to invite the people engaged in the work to stand with the researcher and inquire together about its meaning, thus studying the work of leadership from the inside out. The stance then, becomes one of co-inquiry, a participative approach where we as co-researchers conduct research *with* leaders *on* leadership. It is in developing our stance that we have discovered appreciative inquiry as a powerful tool.

Having declared a preference for a lens, and elaborated the implications of our lens for focus and stance, we suggest that certain methodological choices follow naturally. A constructionist lens on leadership, a focus on the experience of leadership, and a co-inquiry stance demand ways of research engagement that can uncover the relational, shared and meaning-making aspects of the work of leadership. We have

discovered that appreciative inquiry plays a critical role in enhancing our stance and therefore defining the way in which we implement our methodologies.

In this chapter, we work from our experience in a particular research project that is part of a broader program, *Leadership for a Changing World (LCW)*.² Our task is to conduct research about leadership using the experience of program participants in order to contribute to creating a new conversation about leadership in this country, one where social change leadership is understood and valued. We created a multi-modal design that consists of three parallel streams of inquiry—ethnographic inquiry, co-operative inquiry, and narrative inquiry—that all focus on the work of leadership and take an appreciative co-inquiry stance in order to match our conceptual lens: leadership as a social construct.³ These streams are anchored in our commitment to develop appreciative and participatory approaches to research and our belief in the value of conversational encounters with LCW participants as the core activity of the research process. The multi-modal design is aimed at generating practice-grounded research that answers our guiding question: *In what ways do communities trying to make social change engage in the work of leadership?*

Each research method has a tradition of its own, separate from appreciative inquiry, but we argue that each can be taken up in an appreciative manner so as to allow us to add even more coherence to our multi-modal approach and more power to the end result. We focus mostly on the narrative inquiry stream in this chapter and argue that

² Leadership for a Changing World is an awards and recognition program sponsored by the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Washington D.C.-based Advocacy Institute and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

³ See Figure 1 (page 5) for an illustration of how these streams fit together, the connections of these streams to the guiding research question, the expected products for each stream, and the degree of participation of co-researchers in each stream.

[Figure 1 here.]

when joined with a participative and appreciative approach, narrative inquiry offers a unique opportunity to join with leaders as co-researchers to reflect on and learn from their experiences with leadership, thus revealing how they make sense of that experience.

The structure of this chapter is to first elaborate on lens, focus and stance, linking our perspective to the broader leadership field and highlighting the contribution of appreciative inquiry. We then describe in depth the logic behind our methodology. We suggest that the explicit match between methods and lens provides an important contribution to building the cumulative value of leadership research over time. We discuss the contributions of appreciative inquiry in the context of a specific piece of work, LCW, but argue the implications are broader. Finally, we share some reflections about the process of implementing our research design, and hint at what this kind of approach can reveal about leadership by reporting on some of our early insights.

Although we do not report systematic findings, some of our early “hunches” point to the importance of the ways in which our co-researchers and their colleagues reframe how the society values the groups with whom they work. Their reframing approaches often highlight the humanity of these groups and put into stark relief a context that systemically tends to devalue and de-humanize vulnerable populations. These framing processes can help to emphasize the injustice of an issue thereby giving direction to the work and deepening commitment to it among the group and outsiders alike. We have also found some early hints of collective forms of leadership where the work is negotiated or shared among several different individuals or groups. While this chapter

focuses on our process of doing leadership research, these early hunches are elaborated in more detail below. The formal reports of findings from the project will be co-authored with participants of LCW.

Lens: An Emerging Trend to See Leadership as a Social Construction

Instead of entering the leadership definition debate, we made a choice to explore leadership as a social construction.⁴ Through this lens we view leadership as a social construct that is created through dialogue among groups of people in context, not as a fixed attribute of individuals. Our thinking builds on a foundation of contemporary work on leadership.

We begin with a body of work that explores the role of cognition in the emergence of leadership (Gardner 1995), and its transformational and symbolic nature (Burns 1978; Schein 1990). These approaches frame leadership not as a single fixed entity but as something that allows people to agree on direction and action around their common concerns. Building on this beginning, several organizational scholars (Pfeffer 1997; Smircich and Morgan 1982; Smircich 1983; and Tierney 1987 and 1997) have pursued the idea that leadership emerges from the constructions and actions of people in organizations. According to this perspective, leadership becomes a reality when one or more individuals in a social system succeed in framing and defining how the demands of the group will be taken up, and what roles, including “the role of leader,” will be attributed to whom (Hunt 1984; Meindl 1985 and 1995). Pushing this idea to its limit, Pastor (1998) views leadership as “a collective social consciousness that emerges in the

⁴ For a more in depth exploration of our constructionist approach to leadership, see Ospina and Schall (2001).

organization,” and is not only cognitive, but also rooted in social interaction. Because we adopt this lens we are concerned with looking at how groups collectively make sense of their work. However, while breaking new ground theoretically, the agenda to test these constructionist ideas empirically is still in its early development.

Wilfred Drath and Charles Palus at the Center for Creative Leadership offer a particularly intriguing strand of constructionist thinking about leadership that can be used as a foundation upon which a powerful research agenda can be built. In their view, leadership is a type of *meaning and sense making* that can be understood as happening over time and in community. It is “a social process in which everyone in the community participates” (1994: 13). This process is shaped by what Drath calls the “knowledge principle,” or dominant, underlying, and taken-for-granted set of assumptions a community holds about how best to approach the work of leadership.

The knowledge principle that frames a group’s work is directly related to a group’s context. The principle Drath calls personal dominance emerges when people agree to understand leadership as the personal quality of a type of person called leader, who acts toward and upon another type of person, a follower. In this view, a dominant figure is the source of leadership and takes a role as the leader. Under the interpersonal influence principle, leadership is seen as emerging from a process of negotiation among different actors with different perspectives until an individual or a group positions itself as the most influential actor and enacts a particular role of leader. The relational dialogue principle happens when people with differing world views use dialogue and collaborative learning to create spaces where a shared common purpose can be achieved while the

diversity of perspectives is preserved and valued. Leadership, then, in this third principle, does not reside in a person or in a role, but in the social system.⁵

Drath observes that relational dialogue is the newest and least developed knowledge principle, both in the theory and practice of leadership. We would agree that it is the least developed in the theory of leadership, but that scholars have overlooked it in practice due to the lack of conceptual clarity between “leader,” an individual with admirable qualities, and “leadership,” the negotiated property of a social system. This challenge draws our attention to the importance of *focus*.

Focus: A Shift from Studying Leaders to Studying the Work of Leadership

A constructionist lens helps us to understand that existing mental models of leadership—that tend to be individualistic and positional—emerged out of collective processes of meaning making developed in context, and have then taken on a life of their own. As we began to develop the focus of the research in a manner consistent with our lens, we noted three important shifts in the study of leadership: one that allows for attention to shared leadership and the collective meaning making processes that shape the experience of leadership; a second that encourages us to step back and look not at the behavior of individuals but at the tasks groups face as they try to take action; and a third that pushes us to look for leadership in new places.

A handful of researchers have begun to explore the shared quality of leadership (see Bennis and Biederman 1997; Gronn 1999; Goldman and Kahnweiler 2000;

⁵ Drath (2001) argues that these knowledge principles have emerged progressively over time, as society has become more complex and the simpler tools of sense making hit the limit of usefulness. These principles can also be found contemporaneously or in combination, because the principle that helps solve more complex challenges incorporates elements of the principles used to address simpler challenges.

Hesselbein, Goldsmith and Somerville 1999; Huxham and Vangen 2000; Lipman-Blumen 1996; Yukl 1999), and its practical value as a means to produce socially useful outcomes through adaptive work (see Heifetz 1994). This work also takes the idea that leadership is fluid; its dimensions often distributed among several people in the group, rather than concentrated in a single individual (Yukl 1999). Taking it a step further, Kaczmarski and Cooperrider view leadership as the “art of creating contexts of appreciative interchange”, where “differences are embraced rather than being a source of dominance and conformity pressures” (1997: 251). This line of thinking sees leadership as a collective effort and a collective accomplishment.

Attention to ideas like shared leadership is critical, not just because it allows more people to get in the picture, but because the focus of the picture shifts – away from actions of two or three people, to the work the group undertakes together and the way the group authorizes individuals to act on its behalf. For example, by focusing on leadership as activities that stem from a collective challenge, Heifetz’s groundbreaking work directs attention away from an exclusive focus on the “leader” to consider also the acts of leadership, leadership in process, and the public aspects of leadership work.

Drath articulates a similar process that shapes our focus on the work of leadership. He argues that leadership happens when people in a community create a shared understanding of their mutual and moral obligations so that their common cause is realized. Thus, any group of persons attempting to accomplish goals collectively face three crucial tasks: setting direction, creating and maintaining commitment, and adapting to the challenges that appear on the way (the latter refers to what Heifetz calls adaptive challenges). If a group does not respond to these challenges that call for leadership, it will

not survive to serve its purpose. While these are not meant to be an exhaustive list of all that happens when leadership is at work, these three challenges help to set the boundaries of our inquiry. Without such boundaries we could fall into the trap of imagining that everything that happens in the context of a social change effort is the work of leadership.

As we inquire into program participants' stories, we talk with them about the nature of their work, not about leadership directly. Because of our understanding of the socially constructed nature of leadership, we want to avoid invoking dominant mental models of leadership. Instead, we aim to elicit stories about our co-researchers' experience with their work and the meaning they make of that experience. Because of our appreciative frame, our questions focus on high points – stories of what our co-researchers identify as their work at its best. These stories should help us understand how they attend to the tasks of leadership, and what knowledge principles underlie the experience of leadership in each context as groups pursue their collective work.

Finally, even when research is focused on the collective work of leadership, it is frequently set in traditional contexts – corporations and government. The civic reform literature on leadership opens up new venues and reveals new models for understanding leadership. Several of these scholars (Terry 1993; Bryson and Crosby 1992; Crosby 1999; Luke 1998; and Chrislip and Larson 1994) suggest that the interconnectedness of contemporary society demands a different kind of leadership to address public problems, one that is more collective than individual. Similarly, the social movement literature (Couto 1993; Morris 2002; Robnett 1996) and the community and labor organizing literatures (Sacks 1988; Hinsdale, Lewis and Waller 1995) reinforce the attention to the

relational nature of leadership.⁶ These examples allow us to see how a focus on new contexts draws attention to the leadership that exists at multiple levels – not just in the individual who is publicly recognized as a leader.

In sum, a shift in focus directs our attention to new possibilities: shared leadership, leadership as a process of a group not a trait of an individual, and leadership more broadly attributed and understood as existing in many places and taking many forms. Combined with our lens, it follows that we pay attention to the experiences of leaders, their colleagues and members of their communities as they make sense of their collective work.

Stance: The Contribution of Appreciative Inquiry

Shifting the focus away from leaders and toward the collective work of leadership in social change efforts is not meant to diminish the important role that individuals called leaders do play. Instead, it calls for a shift in the role they play in research and a shift in the scholar's stance as well. Given our focus on the experience of leadership in context, we believe that we can best understand how leadership happens “by entering into the community and inquiring into the shared meaning-making languages and processes of the community” (Drath 2001: 49). Leaders then stand with scholars as co-researchers together inquiring into the work of leadership from the inside out.

⁶ For example, in her study of an organizing effort among working-class African American women, Karen Sacks (1988) distinguishes two types of mutually reinforcing leadership roles necessary for success in a social change effort: spokespeople who take on a public presence and centerpeople who are less visible but no less critical to the work. In another example, Robnett (1996) identifies the critical role of women as “bridge leaders” in the civil rights movement. In this role, women were the connectors between the highly visible leaders and community members, doing much of the meaning making work.

This logic led us to take a participatory stance to the research process. In doing so, we join with those who stress the participatory nature of knowledge production and, in particular, the democratic and practice-grounded nature of action research. As Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury describe it, “action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes...” (2001: 1). Further, participatory action research (PAR) has made huge strides to involve communities in learning about their own concerns and to find the tools to address them, aiming to alter the power relationship between researcher and subject (Stringer 1999; Wadsworth 1997; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Whyte 1991).⁷

Our stance pushes us to go beyond trying to alter the power relationship between researcher and subject to entirely re-constructing that relationship into one between co-researchers. For this we turn to John Heron and Peter Reason’s work on co-operative inquiry. Co-operative inquiry is a radically participatory approach to social research in which all participants are considered to be co-inquirers, serving as both co-subjects and co-researchers as they pursue an issue of common interest through cycles of action and reflection (Heron and Reason 2001). While co-operative inquiry is just one of the three specific methods we use in our work with the LCW participants, we apply its definition of co-inquirers to our overall design.

In practice, the challenges of working as co-inquirers are enormous and much has been written about the difficulties involved in having the “subjects” be full participants in shaping the research agenda as well as its implementation (see for example, McGuire 1987; Ospina et al. 2002; Whyte 1991). So while we started with a participative stance,

⁷ Kelly’s (1997) work with African American communities in Chicago represents an excellent example of participatory action research on leadership.

we came to understand that it was not enough. The traditions of action research, participatory action research, and co-operative inquiry are concerned with positive social change, but they do not guarantee an *appreciative* stance. Scholars have criticized action research because it has “largely failed as an instrument for advancing “second order” [i.e., structural] social-organizational transformation... because of its romance with critique at the expense of appreciation” (Ludema et al. 2001).

We understood conceptually the complementary nature of using an appreciative and a participative stance to our inquiry process. As we entered the field and began working collaboratively with our co-researchers, we later came to realize that if we had used only a participatory approach, we would have been missing a powerful dynamic. Our appreciative approach has helped us overcome some of the challenges associated with participatory research by making the task of research less threatening to participants (we do not aim to uncover what is going “wrong” in their work) and thereby helping us to build trust. More importantly, our appreciative and participatory stance with our co-researchers has allowed us to witness and learn about the cutting edge of leadership work in such a way that is and feels qualitatively different from other research traditions we have used in the past, because it is built on valuing.

Even though it is challenging at times (Ospina et al. 2002), our inquiry space is enhanced by our collaboration with the social change leaders. At the time of this writing, our research team consisted of 20 award recipients, including individual leaders and leadership teams (32 people in all), the four authors of this paper, and several outside researchers with whom we have contracted to do specific pieces of the work (e.g.

ethnographies), all serving as co-researchers.⁸ As the research and documentation team for *Leadership for a Changing World*, we play no direct role in selecting the award recipients who ultimately become co-researchers.⁹ Our partner institution, the Washington D.C.-based Advocacy Institute, manages this process. However, we were involved in defining the criteria used for both outreach and selection so that groups that practiced shared leadership and leaders who were committed to learning with others were included.¹⁰

As a group, these award winners bring a diversity of knowledge and experience of social change leadership to the research effort. For example, one is an AIDS policy advocate working to empower African-American communities to tackle the growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS among African-Americans. Another award winner organized a coalition of 17 immigrant and refugee groups in Chicago and helped them hold the INS accountable. There is a team of women fighting mountain top removal mining in rural West Virginia, an organizer of taco vendors in Phoenix, and a team of janitors in Los Angeles who have catalyzed a national campaign to organize their fellow building-service workers. Each co-researcher has a complex story to tell of their experience with leadership.

Once we decided to use a constructionist lens to study leadership, it became compelling to work with these participants to inquire collaboratively into their experience

⁸ Currently, our research team has grown to include an additional 20 award recipients (10 teams, and 10 individuals, for a total of additional 36 people), and several additional outside researchers working with us in all three streams of inquiry.

⁹ For a discussion on the paradox of looking at the collective work of leadership in the context of an awards program for leaders, see Ospina et al. (2002).

¹⁰ Other criteria are that award recipients be leaders who are tackling tough social problems with effective, systemic solutions, that leaders be largely unrecognized outside their field or community but who, if recognized, would inspire many more people to believe they can make a difference. In addition, LCW

of leadership in their communities. Our stance of co-inquiry allows us to do research with leaders on leadership. In developing this stance, we have discovered that appreciative inquiry is a powerful complement to a participative stance, not only for the positive stories it generates about the work, but because of the way in which we are in relationship to our co-researchers. What follows is a discussion of how we are trying to build leadership theory by using an appreciative frame to match three specific methodologies to our constructionist lens.

Method: The Imperative to Match Method to Lens

An internally coherent research design demands that methodological choices be made in accordance with the understanding of the topic being studied. If one sees leadership with a positivist lens, then positivist research methods are most appropriate. However, if leadership is viewed as a social construction, then methods based on social constructionist thinking will be most appropriate. This means creating a design that allows us to focus on the relational, shared and meaning making aspects of the work of leadership while engaging with the participants as co-researchers.

Because a constructionist approach to leadership research is relatively new, the methods associated with it are less developed. There has been work using qualitative research to look at sense making, but it has used traditional positivist paradigms (Meindl 1995; Pastor 1998). Our work attempts to design and test a variety of methods that we believe hold promise for understanding leadership. In assessing the appropriateness of

seeks to recognize leadership that is strategic, brings different groups of people together, is sustainable beyond any individual effort, and gets results.

these methods, our appreciative and participative stance, and our focus on the work of leadership in the context of social change have served as important guidelines.

We could have chosen to use appreciative inquiry as the single methodology in our work because, with its social constructionist roots, it offers a perfect match to lens. However, because the focus of the research is the experience of meaning making, many angles are more likely to generate a full picture of that experience than one. In addition, we knew that our co-researchers would be a diverse group of social change leaders who would respond to different methodologies in varying ways. Finally, a multi-modal design offers the additional benefit of enhancing the trustworthiness of our findings. Therefore, we chose three streams of inquiry: ethnography, co-operative inquiry, and narrative inquiry.

Ethnography - We are using a collaborative and community-based approach to ethnography that looks at the experience of leadership in three to four of the participant communities. Award recipients serve as co-researchers from the very beginning of these ethnographies by first requesting the ethnography, then proposing a focus for it, and ultimately helping with the selection of an ethnographer. By working with the award recipients to define an area of their work that could benefit from being studied, the ethnographers insure that their inquiry focuses on the work of leadership in context rather than on the individual leaders. The use of an appreciative stance within the ethnographic stream brings a generative element to the research and provides a point of entry into reflecting on the participants' experience with their work.

Co-operative Inquiry - Of the three methods we are using in the LCW program, co-operative inquiry has the most natural fit with our stance. In this stream, participants

provide complete direction for the inquiry, defining the question and their action strategies, and reflecting on the sense they make of their experience while taking those actions. While co-operative inquiry is essentially about the participants and their own practice, it is clear that their inquiry focuses on the work of leadership. For example, one of the first LCW co-operative inquiry groups inquired into the question, “How can we create the space/opportunities for individuals to recognize themselves as leaders and develop their leadership?” The “how” of this question focuses on the work.

We have used an appreciative stance in this stream over the full course of the inquiry. In the beginning we used it to allow co-inquirers to share with one another what was most important about their work, so they could begin to hone in on an inquiry question. Throughout the ensuing reflection cycles, appreciative inquiry has been used to emphasize what has worked well as participants generate findings to answer their question. The appreciative stance has also been critical to build the confidence of the participants as “researchers,” given that many of them come into the inquiry with some distrust toward the academy and the traditional research often associated with it.

Enriching Narrative Inquiry: An Appreciative Approach

In conceiving and implementing the narrative stream of our research design, we have developed an integrated approach to the study of leadership that draws from appreciative, participative, and narrative traditions of inquiry. We chose narrative as our core method¹¹ for the LCW program because it is the means through which people make sense of and understand their experience, including their experience of leadership. Narrative inquiry, as a process, has much in common with the way in which we

understand leadership. We view both leadership and narrative to be socially constructed and begin with the understanding that the narratives do not “objectively” mirror reality; “they are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive” (Riessman 1993: 5). We are interested precisely in seeing how participants interpret the work they do and how those interpretations tell us something about leadership.

We ground narrative in the participative tradition because we see the need to get inside peoples’ experience, to make sense of leadership from the inside out. We could have simply taken a participative approach to narrative inquiry to generate new understanding of how leadership happens in these social change efforts. The argument we develop here, though, is that by enriching a participative narrative inquiry with an appreciative stance we can take the work further. The combination of these elements – narrative with a participative and appreciative stance – creates a synergy that helps us deepen our connection with the award recipients, add value to their work, and ultimately, we hope, create stories that generate new understanding about leadership.

More specifically, appreciative inquiry shares a constructionist epistemology with our approach to narrative inquiry that makes for an internally consistent and enhanced hybrid methodology. As Cooperrider and Srivastva describe it, appreciative inquiry assumes that the “social order at any given point is viewed as the product of broad social agreement, whether tacit or explicit” (137). An important implication of this assumption is that sense making is open to revision through interaction and dialogue with others, whether with colleagues, researchers, or anyone else. Appreciative inquiry capitalizes on this insight and uses processes of shared meaning making to generate positive images of

¹¹ Narrative inquiry is the one stream in our research that engages all twenty award recipients.

the future. For our purposes in doing leadership research, meaning creation is relational, and that conversation, including interviewing, can be generative of “fresh alternatives” or new ways of understanding one’s experience.

This constructionist and “life centric” focus of appreciative inquiry takes us away from a problem-solving stance to an appreciative one that “draws the researcher to go beyond superficial appearances to deeper levels of the life-generating essentials and potentials of social existence... to illuminate the factors and forces involved in organizing that serve to nourish the human spirit” (Cooperrider and Srivastva: 131). In other words, appreciative inquiry allows for deep reflection about the work of leadership, and searches out practices (factors and forces) that already nourish the human spirit in the hope of contributing to their development and enhancement.

Our narrative inquiry approach adopts this appreciative stance so that it becomes an inquiry not simply about (re)telling stories but “retelling of stories that allow for growth and change” (Clandinin and Connelly 71). In other words, working collaboratively to enhance our understanding of leadership has the potential to be grounding for action, for our co-researchers, and, if we are able to generate sound theory, for others as well. Jim Ludema noted this generative connection between narrative inquiry and appreciative inquiry in his dissertation where he writes, “[e]liciting positive narrative responses from interviewees [is] most generative of collective hope, knowledge, and action in the organizational and communal contexts” (115).

For these reasons, it is our belief that these appreciatively constructed stories, once shared, will inspire and give substance to new conversations about leadership in this country. What follows is the story of how we engaged our co-researchers in this

particular approach to narrative inquiry and how appreciative inquiry enhanced both our co-researchers' experience and our collective learning.

Developing the Inquiry

We began this work by asking our co-researchers to identify the two or three dimensions of their work that they would like to focus on throughout the narrative inquiry and ultimately in the leadership story we committed to co-producing with them. By doing this we focused the inquiry from the outset on the work of leadership rather than on the leaders (following Drath 2001). Our invitation served a second and perhaps even more important purpose. It allowed us to engage them as co-researchers early in the process, at least theoretically. At first our attempt to be participative was not an immediate success. Despite having information about the conversation ahead of time, many were still unclear about our intentions and did not immediately take up their role with ease. What did we mean by dimensions of the work, they wondered, and where was this process going?

Once we were able to enact our appreciative stance, their role became much clearer to them. When we posed questions like, "What dimensions of your work do you think most contribute to your organization's success? What elements of your work would help others learn the most from your experience?" then our co-researchers were more able to join the conversation. This first step helped us to establish trust and gave us some early insights about their leadership work. For one thing, the emphasis so many put on bridging and partnering affirmed our sense of leadership as a collective and relational process.

To honor the social nature of their leadership stories, we invited our co-researchers to include a diversity of colleagues and community members in the telling of their stories. We encouraged them to select people who knew their work well, brought a range of views, and represented the different “milieus” affected by the work. Our appreciative stance seemed to help our co-researchers feel safe about including multiple perspectives to enrich their stories, and some even took our suggestion to include a thoughtful critic. Further, we organized the interviews as group conversations to model leadership as it happens in their community. By conducting these conversations in groups, we could encourage the development of integrated and multi-faceted stories that contain some interpretation that might be missing in a one-on-one conversation.

We then developed an approach to eliciting stories about the dimensions of the work that our co-researchers identified. A straight narrative approach might have asked questions like, “How did you first begin establishing ties with non-traditional allies in your community?” Again, this approach may have helped us to develop an understanding of how they approach their work, but we wanted something more. We wanted to engage the co-researchers, their colleagues, and community members in deep reflection that would uncover their knowledge principle: the underlying and taken-for-granted set of assumptions their community holds about how best to approach the work of leadership (Drath 2001), that are at work when leadership is happening at its best (Ludema 1996).

To facilitate this kind of deeply reflective and generative conversation, we created appreciative protocols¹² for two two-hour conversations and customized them for each co-researcher based on the dimensions they defined. Our first conversation was with the

¹² Copies of this protocol can be obtained by writing to Amparo Hofmann, Associate Project Director, CHPSR, 726 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003.

awardees and their close colleagues. It was designed to elicit stories about the work, to set the context, to understand key issues, triumphs and conflicts, as well as their relationships to the wider community. We paid particular attention to the main practices (such as “building coalitions”) that our co-researchers had identified. The main purpose of the second conversation with other members of the community was to enrich the leadership story, add multiple perspectives, and flesh out the social dimensions of the work.

For both conversations, the protocols had three sections. They opened with an invitation to participants to share either what they value about the organization or one of their earliest positive memories of it. We found that this question helped build trust with people we had never met before, largely because it began from a stance of valuing and appreciation. Then, the majority of the conversation was dedicated to exploring the dimensions of the work that our co-researchers had identified as central. Through this part of the conversation, our role was to intervene only to probe for details of a story, to keep the conversation moving, to reinforce our appreciative stance, or to keep focused on themes relevant to our research question and the co-researchers’ interests. The final part of the protocols included an appreciative question about the future, something like, “What do you see happening in the organization right now that gives you hope for the future?” In this way, if it had not happened already, we were able to bring a generative element to the conversation.

To conduct these conversations, we visited each of our co-researchers. Our travels took us from Maine to Alaska and many places in between – the mountains of West Virginia, the immigrant communities of Nebraska and Arizona, and the inner city of San

Francisco to name a few. While this was generally our first visit to our co-researchers' place of work, we were often welcomed as old colleagues, invited to dinner in their homes or to go out "into the field" to meet the people who are most affected by the issues on which they work. We had built trust with our co-researchers much more quickly than usually happens in a more traditional research project, and we believe this is due, in part, to our appreciative stance. The intimate atmosphere of many of our co-researchers' work places – some work out of their home, others work alone in casual offices – also facilitated trust building.

Similarly, once we entered the field through these visits — bringing colleagues and community members together to reflect collectively — other participants felt at ease with the process. The wheels of conversation were greased by questions like, "Can you tell me about a time when you were particularly proud of the way you handled conflict in your organization?" A potentially contentious issue like conflict, which had been defined as a central dimension by one of our co-researchers, was easily discussed by organizational insiders and outsiders alike because of the appreciative way in which it was framed. We have been gratified with the way in which our appreciative stance helps our co-researchers' colleagues jump into the conversation in such a natural and passionate way to tell us how they feel when things are at their best.

Since we view leadership as a relational process, narrative accounts of the work are not possessions of the participants telling the stories but are instead possessions of broader sets of relationships (Ludema 1996: 167). In other words, stories are social products, much in the same way that leadership is a social product. Through these social products, we were able to see how these communities address the leadership challenges

Drath defines: setting direction, creating and sustaining commitment, and adapting to change. We believe that both the stories and the way in which they were told provided an understanding of their experience of leadership that may allow us to begin to uncover the community's knowledge principle.

Of course we encountered challenges. Cultural differences still mattered and made mutual understanding difficult in some cases. Our intended design for the conversations did not always work. For example, the word "success" turned out to be loaded language for our co-researchers. Before answering questions like "Could you tell me about a time when you were particularly successful at establishing partnerships?" they would want us to explain what we meant by success. The power of appreciative inquiry, though, was in its ability to quickly ease anxiety. When re-framed as "Could you tell me about a partnership that has really helped you deliver on your mission in ways you didn't imagine before?" or "Tell me about a partnership that you are particularly proud of. How did it develop?" our co-researchers and the others jumped to share stories with us. In fact, we discovered that a sense of pride was a very helpful feeling to tap into, one that led them to collectively develop rich narratives of their experience with leadership.

At this point in the research, we have completed the first stage of the transcript analysis. This stage involved taking large amount of raw data and transforming them into analytical, or synthesis texts (Kelchtermans 1999) that captured key themes, processes, and stories focusing primarily on the uniqueness of each award recipient's work. During the final part of this stage, the analytical texts were transformed into "leadership stories" that were shared with our co-researchers for reflection and feedback. The final stories will result from an iterative process of co-production. As we move forward with the

work, we are beginning to link the data and stories from each co-researcher through a “horizontal analysis” (Kelchtermans 1999) across sites to find patterns and similarities that go beyond the particulars of each context. As we begin the early stages of this work, we have great hope that our appreciative stance will yield important insights about leadership for social change.

Reflections on our work

In reflecting on the visits to our co-researchers’ community, we noted that the process of the group conversations felt very different than other interviewing techniques we have used in the past. These conversations not only introduced us to each co-researcher’s work, and gave us insights about the contexts in which they are carrying it out, but they also gave us insights about the values that uphold the work, the factors and relationships that make it possible, and the commitments that nourish it.

Conceptualizing our interviews with award recipients and their colleagues as conversations to generate appreciative narratives allowed us, the award recipients and the community members with whom we spoke to reflect on multiple levels. The conversations offered people a chance to tell stories about the here and now of their experience as well as step back and reflect on the meaning of those stories. In Heron and Reason’s terms, the conversations used experiential, presentational and propositional ways of knowing (2001). In Ronald Heifetz’s terms, they were stories from the dance floor as well as from the balcony (1994). In most cases, the research space we created generated deeper, more reflective conversations than we could have hoped to have in such a short time.

We are not the only ones who have commented on the value appreciative inquiry added to this process. Some of our co-researchers have enjoyed the chance to take time out of their busy schedules to reflect on their work in ways that are not usually possible, and using a framework that moves them away from traditional problem solving. One award recipient was even inspired to write something on his own about the leadership that happens in his community. We are gratified that the process spurred more inquiry about his experience of leadership even though at the beginning he had expressed ambivalence about the value of the process for his own work.

In other cases, this work has provided the opportunity for different members of an organization to share their stories and learn something about the work from each other that they might not have known, something they have valued. We have also seen some evidence that these conversations have the potential to generate new images and vocabularies that participants can bring back to their communities to motivate the work.

With respect to early insights about social change leadership, we know that it is too early in our process to have anything more than “hunches” to help answer the question: in what ways do communities trying to make social change engage in the work of leadership? As expected, ideas and possible leads have started to emerge. These leads seem promising and we will pursue them more systematically as we continue to engage in the cross-site analysis.

For example, we have found that the work of most award recipients is supported by a passionate belief in the humanity of the marginalized populations with which they work. The relentless commitment to this premise has a direct impact on how the work is framed. At the same time, as this commitment gets to be “embedded” in the actions and

products of the work, it also challenges the common perceptions that the larger society has of these populations.

The cognitive leadership literature (Gardner 1995; Schon and Rein 1994) and the contemporary social movement literature¹³ have already brought attention to the power of reframing (Snow and Benford 1992, Morris 2002). According to Alberto Melucci (1996), actors in social movements engage in redefining reality symbolically, rejecting dominant representations of issues (and, if we are right, the people who are affected by issues). Our preliminary work suggests that most of our co-researchers and their colleagues engage in reframing how the society *values* the people/groups with whom they work. For some, this means treating often-marginalized groups as unique people with dreams and aspirations. For others, it means holding people accountable—i.e., *capable*—for addressing the seemingly insurmountable obstacles they face. Both these approaches highlight their humanity, given a systemic context that tends to devalue and de-humanize vulnerable populations.

The lens, focus, stance and methods we use in our research have helped us see that, as recognized leaders of their organizations, our co-researchers seem to be giving voice to something that belongs to the community, not just to themselves. They seem to be holding for the group – and helping them enact – the core belief that as human beings they deserve better and that it is worth taking a stance for this belief. They are involved together in a process of reframing, a process that is taking place individually and collectively. Borrowing insights from the social movements' literature we can say that

¹³ We suspect that not all award recipients would claim a connection to a social movement, even though their work is clearly geared toward making social change. However, we would argue that concepts developed in social movement theory are relevant to their work. The difference does not seem to be qualitative, as much as a matter of scale.

reframing the meaning of the community underscores and exaggerates the social injustice of an issue, or makes a formerly tolerable problem into an unjust issue thus setting direction to the work and catapulting people into action (Snow and Benford 1992).

In the case of social change leadership, reframing may help mobilize the community or the members of a given population to take action for their own sake and encourages commitment to the work. The very process of engagement is empowering for people because they can see their own ideas taking shape and often creating real change. Furthermore, by working with marginalized groups, and having high expectations of what they can accomplish, our co-researchers and the colleagues in their organizations help to present an image of the population to the public that flies directly in the face of common perceptions.

As we see this reframing happening, we also see collective forms of leadership emerging. Indeed, the collective aspect of leadership seems very present among the award recipients' organizations despite the variations in structure. We see consistency here with the shared leadership literature (Bennis and Biederman 1997; Gronn 1999; Goldman and Kahnweiler 2000; Hesselbein, Goldsmith and Somerville 1999; Huxham and Vangen 2000; Lipman-Blumen 1996; Yukl 1999) and most importantly, with the civic reform leadership literature (Terry 1993; Bryson and Crosby 1992; Crosby 1999; Luke 1998; and Chrislip and Larson 1994). Many of the stories we have heard suggest that, whatever the organizational form, leadership emerges from open and, and at times harshly honest, feedback and negotiation among at least two or more people. While too early to make a formal claim, we venture here to say that there may be some evidence in

the work of our co-researchers, of what Drath calls the “relational dialogue” knowledge principle of leadership.

In the more hierarchically structured organizations, the executive director may have a “right hand” person who either acts as a rudder to make the work stay on course, or acts as the visionary to push innovation in a well-managed organization. In some of the less bureaucratic organizations, formal leadership is assumed by a team and the structure is very flat and horizontal, with room for lots of exchange from other stakeholders that goes beyond simple consultation. One award recipient team, for example, is very intentional about creating a decentralized structure and checks and balances on power within the organization to ensure that the work is driven by the members and “leaders” (or members who take on greater responsibility for the work). In some cases the formal leader and staff work closely with a Board whose members are often actively involved in both the internal decision-making and external actions on behalf of the organization’s primary population. In some cases, board members *are* members of that population.

In all these cases, we have heard stories that suggest that often the leadership functions are more diffused than what the traditional leadership literature has suggested; leadership seems to take the form of a group of complementary actors who share various functions, for example, organizing and connecting with constituents, lobbying and negotiating with high-level officials, and coordinating publicity. This idea may not seem new, especially in the light of community organizing and the social movements’ literature, but we believe that the leadership applications of this insight have been missed before. For example, if successful leadership in these organizations includes a complementary group of individuals, similar to what Morris, Robnett and Sacks propose

for the social movements they studied, then leadership transitions and succession efforts in organizations need to take this into account. Too frequently, an executive director will groom one individual to replace them, when it might make more sense to nourish and recruit several individuals, perhaps one who officially leads the organization, and others who provide critical support.

These reflections are, of course, still very tentative, as it is too early in our work to have developed systematic findings. Our intention has been to illustrate the usefulness of our approach rather than to present formal claims about the nature of leadership for social change.

Conclusion

If our hunches prove to have some merit, reframing may represent a critical dimension that needs to be further explored to understand leadership as a process of meaning making in a community of practice. In insisting on humanizing a community that has been dehumanized by others, the work of most of our co-researchers challenges basic societal assumptions about how the world is and ought to be. We suspect that this challenge opens up a new range of possibilities to help frame the direction of the work, to provide the moral ground for staff and community members to commit to it, and to find ways to adapt to the challenges of achieving the social change goals that sustain their organizations. Pursuing this line of thinking further may provide evidence to support the emerging constructionist conception of leadership reviewed earlier in this chapter.

Given our argument – about the role of appreciative inquiry in helping us more effectively understand leadership – it is worth speculating whether attention to the

reframing process would have emerged as it has, had we used a more traditional approach in our study. We cannot be sure, of course, but we suspect that, had we not emphasized the meaning-making nature of leadership (lens), or had we focused on the leaders rather than the work (focus), this idea would have gotten lost. Our lens makes us very attentive to how members of the community, including our co-researchers, understand their own experience, how and why they do their work, and in doing it, how they enact leadership. Therefore, we have noticed their commitment to humanize members of their communities as an important starting point to understand how they make collective sense of their work.

Similarly, had we only used a participative stance, without emphasizing the generative dimensions of the work as an appreciative stance proposes, the conversations and stories the participants would have told may have had a very different tone. By framing the questions appreciatively, it was only natural for participants to talk about the appreciative stance that they themselves have about their own communities, and to express how this vision drives their work. We have a long way to go before we can report the hunches we describe here as solid claims that provide insights about leadership. But we believe that what we are seeing will offer new vistas of the work of communities making social change that will enrich our present understanding of leadership.

It truly is the combination of narrative inquiry with a participative and appreciative stance that has allowed the research process to be of such value to all involved. Because this work was grounded in narrative, it uncovered people's understanding of their experiences in a rich way; because our conversations were participative (in their design and focus), they resulted in practice-grounded (and therefore

“on the mark”) interpretations of the work of leadership; and because we took an appreciative stance, we were able to engage with people in a trusting way. It is because the work has been at once appreciative, narrative, and participative that we have confidence that it will generate positive stories that are grounded in practice, that highlight how one can do social change work successfully, and that inspire others so they might work toward “worthwhile human purposes,” and “imagine different ways of being together” (Reason & Bradbury 2001). Appreciative inquiry, then, will fulfill its potential when its use as an inquiry tool flourishes as well as its application in interventions.

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